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Infrastructural Performance Reclaiming Social Relationality in Times of Structural Precarity

CECILIE ULLERUP SCHMIDT

ABSTRACT

As freelance workers are living in inconstancy and increasing social isolation, a crucial question arises: how can solidarity be reclaimed through a critique of structural precarity? Precarity as a consequence of neoliberal working conditions is analysed and problematized across academic disciplines. Departing from Lauren Berlant's description of structural precarity and Judith Butler's elaborations on performativity, I propose the term infrastructural performance in order to portray artistic strategies which criticize inequality and organize collectively. I analyse the infrastructural performance of the performance art collective cobratheater.cobra to show how precarity has provoked organisational and artistic reconfigurations in the independent performance art scene. I demonstrate how features within the neoliberal work ethos such as the repetition of the artistic signature, individualisation, and the imperative of mobility are dismantled by the group's infrastructural performance. I conclude that infrastructural performance criticises structural precarity through collective actions of infection, exposure, and disobedience. It is a new form of collective artistic organisation, which proposes the possibility of change in social and economic conditions. At the end of the article, I speculate how infrastructural performance might change the conception of the art work itself.

KEYWORDS

Infrastructural performance, structural precarity, neoliberalism, performance art, collectivism, self-organisation

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Infrastructural Performance

Reclaiming Social Relationality in Times of Structural Precarity

What constitutes continuity amid the pressure of structural instability?

Lauren Berlant (2011b, 69)

How can we struggle around or organise diffuse forms of cultural and artistic labor?

Stephen Shukastis (2016, 74)

I'm a part of a network which has so many protagonists and so little structure that all financial supporters and institutions constantly say: Set up an organisation. Set up a business entity. Set up a contact person.

Carolin Gerlach about the network cobratheater.cobra (2016, 4)

INTRODUCTION

The possibilities of creating artistic work depend on an infrastructure of venues and funding. In Europe, the contemporary cultural policy behind venues and funding builds on the notion of national belonging, international mobility as well as an ideology of the (soloist) artist genius. I define *Infrastructure* within artistic production as the organisational model, which determines how artists can work, move, and live their lives. American literature professor Lauren Berlant describes infrastructure as an organisational model consisting of “patterns, habits, and norms of use.”¹ Infrastructure is performative or, as Berlant writes, “infrastructure is defined by use and movement.”² I employ the term infrastructure as an organisational model which is not just given through policy and institutions, but can be performed, moulded, and changed. *Infrastructural Performance* is, then, the specific negotiation of the given condi-

1 Berlant 2011a, 4.

2 Berlant 2011b, 393.

tions of economy and sociality. It is a reconfiguration of structural conditions, which determine how we work and live.

As theoreticians such as Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, Bojana Kunst, Isabelle Lorey and Angela McRobbie have demonstrated for more than a decade, artists and freelance cultural workers have long been living the “role model” of work in precarity. I am curious to see how artists reflect and respond to this state of precarity in their way of organising: might there be more socially and financially sustainable ways of working?

When looking at the performance art scene with its imperative of the constant production of ephemeral works, of transformation, of building portfolios with recognizable and outstanding signatures, I am hopeful about the tactics of certain young, international groups such as cobratheater.cobra, Breakfast Club, and DANSEatelier, which have all emerged out of educational programmes for performance art within the last five years.³ What I find compelling – following Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (2007) – in analysing these artistic practices of collectivism, is how collectivism inevitably exposes and attacks “broader social and economic conditions of production.”⁴ In the context of neoliberalism, every sphere of life is economised and each individual is working on herself as a company, measuring and accounting her individual production.⁵ The performance groups mentioned above propose other ways of performing and re-forming the economic and social conditions, which we are offered in neoliberalism. In various ways, the groupings mentioned above actively resist the conventions of recognisability, belonging, and governable behaviour through their infrastructural performance. Yet, before looking into the specific infrastructural performance of cobratheater.cobra, I want to propose *structural precarity* as the contextual horizon on which this phenomenon figures.

In this article, I read precarity in the context of the work⁶ and economy

3 The following two collectives will not be explored further here but can be summarized briefly as this: DANSEatelier is a group of 13 alumni from Dance & Choreography at the Danish National School of Performing Arts, who, through a shared space, continuous daily, collective practice, and performance nights with a broad spectrum of associated artists exercise an infrastructural performance where the shared space and continuous practice oppose neoliberal individualisation and mobility. Breakfast Club consists of 11 members from 9 different countries, all graduates from the Inter-University of Dance in Berlin, and attacks directly the privilege of the nation state. Breakfast Club redistributes national funding between its trans-national members and opposes the idea of privileged belonging. See also Schmidt 2017.

4 Stimson and Sholette 2007, 11.

5 Brown 2016, 23, 30.

6 I consequently employ the term “work” instead of “labour”, since – following post-Marxist feminist Kathi Weeks – “work” is associated with waged activity opposed to the broader understanding of “living labour” as something alternative happening “outside” waged work time (Weeks 2011, 14–15). In times of the neoliberal economisation of every human activity (as for example unfolded by Wendy Brown in *Undoing the Demos* (2015)), I don’t find a division between waged work and living labour productive, since every kind of activity potentially counts and adds to or disrupts the individual value pro-

of the independent performance artist: A precarity based on short-term contracts, being one's own boss, and own employee, performing social and geographical flexibility, having freedom to follow one's desires and to decide the rhythm of work, and only a few social rights, if any. I want to address structural conditions of precarity in my historical present in order to address the challenges of the subject in new forms of work, specifically the work of the freelance performance artist. Through a reading of the performance group labelled *cobratheater.cobra*, I show how they, through infrastructural performances, criticize the demand for artistic signature, individualisation, austerity politics, and inequality. I want to discuss how performance collectives display structural precarity not only as distribution of political powerlessness, but also as a reason for forming models for "rethinking social relationality"⁷ through a reorganisation of infrastructure (Butler, Berlant). Consequently, I want to examine the sustainability of these reorganised infrastructures: what happens to economic stability, the possibility of family, continuous work-relations, or close friendships? Is it possible to imagine temporary models of situated critique ten years ahead? In a final perspective, I will consider whether the infrastructural performance might change the conception of the art work itself.

PRECARITY MADE BY STRUCTURES

Precarity is a term employed on life formed by structurally determined inequality and insecurity: the everyday is filled by worries such as if social security can be guaranteed, whether there will be jobs in the future, if one can afford having a family, falling ill, aging. Here, the citizen puts a lot of affective labour into thinking about how to sustain an acceptable life.

Berlant explores affective responses to structurally conditioned precarity in the US where poverty, inequality, and structural inconstancy are caused by racial hierarchies, reproduction of class, and austerity politics. She defines precarity as a structural condition coming out of "[...] the privatization of wealth and the slow and uneven bankrupting of so many localities (nations, states, regions) beginning in the 1970s: leading to such uneven desiccation of the public sector materially, ideologically, and in fantasy that 'austerity' has developed into the name for the new realism."⁸

Precarity is defined by Berlant as a structural condition growing out of capitalism over the past nearly 50 years, where the public sector has been shrinking in the global North, labor has been globalised, debts have been growing, and where the rationale is to cut welfare when crisis threatens growth. Furthermore, Berlant defines precarity as an affective resonance of this structural diet:

[...] an ongoing (structurally) economic problem – first, indicating that capital-

duction. Through this, I also focus on a critique of work in all its complexity, instead of opening a utopian idea about labour "outside economy" or "without interest".

7 Berlant et al. 2012, 170.

8 Berlant et.al. 2012, 166.

*ism thrives on instability; and second, pointing to the ways that capitalist forms of labor make bodies and minds precarious, holding out the promise of flourishing while wearing out the corpus we drag around in different ways and at different rates, partly by overstimulation, partly by under stimulation, and partly by the incoherence with which alienation is lived as exhaustion plus saturating intensity.*⁹

Berlant stresses how capitalism has structurally inserted instability as an existential feeling. She makes a notable link between the ways of working in capitalism and the production of precarious subjectivation: The constant changes of rhythm resulting in a bodily and mental exhaustion. Through various analyses of literature and film works, Berlant points out how an individual self-precarisation – a sort of self-interpellation of a disappointing narrative of one’s own life – takes place through, what she calls, a general *cruel optimism*. Here a collective fantasy of “the good life” is practiced: a hetero-familial, upwardly mobile good-life fantasy¹⁰ including “job security, political and social equality and lively, durable intimacy.”¹¹ Yet, this fantasy is lost in the clash with an individual reality of structural inconstancy. Broken, unrealistic promises make the individuals of cruel optimism face their life as a continuum of defeats with the soundtrack of guilt – “I didn’t manage to...”. This individual effect of loss, as Berlant stresses, belongs to the general structure of feelings in capitalism.¹² Berlant refers to the dichotomy of individual structures of feeling and structural conditions set by contemporary politics. She detects a general cruel optimism in capitalism echoed in many individual “situation tragedies,”¹³ where one personal disaster seems to lead to the next. Precarity is structurally destabilising, yet felt on a very concrete, subjective level “at home” with such common symptoms as “a lack of time, energy, money, multiple work commitments leaving little time for meetings or even travelling to meetings, burn-out, health issues, including mental health, forced migration, visa issues, care duties.”¹⁴ The political “capacity to act”¹⁵ within one’s own life and in public is limited. Or, as Slovenian art theoretician Bojana Kunst

9 Berlant et al. 2012.

10 Berlant 2011b, 11.

11 Berlant 2011b, 3.

12 Berlant emphasises her methodological ambition to track individual feelings into generalisation: “This is part of my method, to track the becoming general of singular things, and to give those things materiality by tracking their resonances across many scenes.”

(Berlant 2011b, 12)

13 Berlant 2011b: 6.

14 See “Precarious Workers Brigade: Transversal Articulations of Art Workers’ Organising Precarious Workers Brigade interviewed by Tereza Stejskalová and Barbora Kleinhamlová” p. 171–18 in Henriksson et al. 2015, 172.

15 Butler 2017, 5.

states, a certain powerlessness towards political change is experienced.¹⁶ The genre of the individualized situation tragedy leads me to look at the internalization of the structures of the freelance worker, hereunder specifically the performance artist, who embodies the rhythm and life of structural precarity.

The precarious worker as a figure covers not only artists and cultural workers, but also migrant workers, PhD students, interns, students, service workers, manual workers, and freelancers (without any noticeable, continuous success). The precarity of the freelancer is substantially described by German political theoretician Isabell Lorey. She traces in the close relation between freedom and insecurity, between the entrepreneurial, passionate, self-governed work-life and the lack of security.¹⁷ The etymology of the freelancer is the medieval knight being hired to fight for whatever lord offering the best conditions. The freelancer risks his life in the name of others, yet he travels alone from one temporary employment to the next. He lives out an unreserved mobility and he serves neither a nation, nor a religion, nor a political direction. Berlant describes the freelancer as one of the key figures in neoliberalism: a mobile and “post-geographic” character preferring “entrepreneurial precarity [...] giving “herself to the dream.””¹⁸ The artist in particular is seen as a *happy worker*, loving what she is doing, thankfully accepting chances in place of fees and operating in self-constituted sovereignty.¹⁹

What makes the independent performance artist a figure exposing the conditions of artistic freelance work to its extremes is the immateriality, embodiment, and ephemerality of the genre of performance art. Here, the personality and the body are the main materials in the artistic practice: Think of solo pioneers of body art Carolee Schneemann or Marina Abramovic, or contemporary performance artists with bodies in political conflict such as the South African feminist Mamela Nyamza or Serbian border-crosser Tanja Ostojic. Or think of British and German performance art collectives such as Forced Entertainment, She She Pop or Gob Squad drawing on their relations and conflicts as the main motive of their performances. Obviously, affective and bodily work are at the center of these artists’ political production. Since the personal-political is at the center of performance art, it cannot be delegated to others, nor repeated, but requires authentic passion *in personae*.²⁰ With Derrida, I would say that performance art, as a genre, lives from producing

16 Kunst 2015, 154–155.

17 Lorey 2006; 2012.

18 Gibson quoted in Berlant 2011b, 76.

19 The figure of the “happy artist” is a strange prejudice, “dream” or promise: the artist is assumed to be in constant happiness and self-fulfilment through work as opposition to all other workers being unhappy. Such assumption of the happy artist paralyzes the possibility of structural critique from the artists. The price of the “free” preference of passion and pleasure is the loss of rights and protection, but also of the right to complain...

20 Even when mediated, as in performances of Gob Squad or The Wooster Group, the play with the expected “ontological” authenticity of the genre is at the centre, as pointed out by, amongst others, Philip Auslander in *Liveness* (1999).

differance. Therefore, similarly to other consumptions in capitalism, performance art steadily produces “the new” and through this constant transformation and production, new ways of seeing and consuming, a.k.a. growth.²¹ So, if performance art serves the demands of capitalism perfectly in its productivity, and at the same time exhausts the artists through structural precarity, how can artists then propose more socially and economically sustainable ways of working?

American philosopher and feminist Judith Butler insists on analyzing structural distribution in social and economic institutions when addressing new forms of work within academia and the arts: “I want to caution against an existential reading and insist that what is at stake is a way of *rethinking social relationality* [...] our precarity is to a large extent dependent upon the organization of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of *sustaining infrastructures* and social and political institutions. In this sense, precarity is indissociable from that dimension of politics that addresses the organization and protection of bodily needs. Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency.”²² Where Berlant detects individual situation tragedies and Kunst mourns a powerlessness towards political change, Butler insists on actively rethinking sociality. With the backdrop of structural precarity, Butler formulates optimism towards the collective re-structuring, towards new ways of assembling.²³

INFECT AND EXPLODE THE SIGNATURE

I find in the multi-levelled work of *cobratheater.cobra*. an example of how infrastructural performance collectively negotiates and opposes the structural precarity of performance artists. Their way of organising collectively criticizes (at least) three conditions within structural precarity: The idea of an artistic signature, the isolation and exhaustion of freelance workers, and the imperative of individual mobility.

cobratheater.cobra is a group of more than 40 members from visual arts, performance art, and cultural studies. Based in Germany, members of *cobratheater.cobra* have mainly studied at the Department of Cultural Studies and Aesthetic Communication at the University of Hildesheim, which is, amongst others, directed by the professor for experimental forms of contemporary theatre and founding group member of the performance collective *She She Pop*, Annemarie Matzke. After a few decades of hyping the brand of the *collective* in German performance art, influenced by the many successful graduates from the Institute of Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen, *cobratheater.cobra*

21 Bojana Kunst points out, with reference to Brian Massumi’s mourning of the loss of normality, how “weirdness” of performance art is a promise of growth and radical consumption (Kunst 2015, 21).

22 Berlant et al. 2012, 170, my highlighting.

23 See also a concrete analysis of social movements in Butler’s book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015).

calls itself neither a collective nor a self-organised workers' association, but a *network* and a *label*. cobratheater.cobra is influenced by digital technologies and it works – partly due to its dispersed workers all over Germany – widely through the medium of the internet. To describe the relationality of themselves, cobratheater.cobra deploys the metaphor of infection (German: *Ansteckung*): When you have been infected – that is involved – in a cobratheater.cobra production, you're automatically licenced to use the label for your own work.²⁴ Despite the easily obtained admittance to the label, another inauguration ritual is demanded: You have to let at least two – until then to you unknown – members of cobratheater.cobra attend and criticize a version of your art work before going public. This peer critique must go public along with the art work. The infective principle means that cobratheater.cobra is constantly expanding as a network: The cobra snake, the hyper-flexible line of vertebrae, has, as it says on its official website, no end. The very "casting" of members is uncontrollable and results in a diverse identity with divergent aesthetics. The inauguration ritual – getting a peer critique from unknown members – exercises a continued criticality among the members.

Opposed to the idea of the "artist genius" or the autonomous theatre director, cobratheater.cobra has no addressable spokesperson, front figure, or identifiable "creative mind". Neither has it an aesthetic mission, as opposed to numerous German collectives educated since the late 90s in Giessen. There is an obvious critique of authorship and of artistic signature in insisting on the diversity of a label. Furthermore, the aesthetic contingency makes the group a sincere provocation to art councils: when cobratheater.cobra sends eight applications to the Berlin Senate, who is then being supported? In the reading of the application, the network forces the appointed jury to close-read each of the applications in order to estimate the specific artistic proposals. Since cobratheater.cobra is a network and its website-calendar presents a hyper-activity of work as well as a many-voiced authorship, there is no portfolio or artistic recognisability to rely on. As Marx said, the collective action of workers exposes the fragile construction of individuality: "When the labourer co-operates systematically with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species."²⁵ In collective action, cobratheater.cobra devalues the artist genius as a prisoning narrative building on a speculative accumulation of aesthetic praxis as property. I read the explosive production of identities and dissonant aesthetics within the label cobratheater.cobra as an infrastructural performance criticising artistic identification: a strategic labelling to cause destabilisation of the judgemental premises for traditional infrastructural support within (performance) art. The infective network disturbs identification as we know it from the art world: Here, I neither identify the artist genius, nor the (German) performance collective nor the workers' association. The artistic signature has exploded.

24 See <http://www.cobratheatercobra.com/die-cobra/> 5 May 2017

25 Karl Marx (1867) 1887, 230..

EXPOSE EXHAUSTION AND ISOLATION

cobratheater.cobra attack the structural level of precarity, when they, through strategic labelling, infect the purity of the “artist genius” and explode the artistic signature. They display an affective level of precarity when they expose their own daily interpellation as cultural workers within the field of performance art. In the concrete performance work, *Caro von Cobra auf Kampnagel* (2016), cobratheater.cobra makes visible the common precarity, which gathers and characterises the work and lives of the cobra-members. In an artistic statement at Kampnagel on Nov. 26, 2016, presented in the frame of the discursive evening, a so-called “apparatus”, *Really Useful Theater* curated by Stefanie Wenner and Thorsten Eibeler, the performance artist Carolin Gerlach stands alone in the manège representing nine digitally present colleagues of cobratheater.cobra. Through short *snap-chat* messages with video confessions, the colleagues send their “updates” to Gerlach in a medium designed for ephemeral, personal statements: Mothers, artists, thinkers, and other workers across Germany complain about their exhaustion due to a forthcoming premiere of a political theatre piece and the organisation of a child’s birthday, a late-night deadline and a next-morning rehearsal with colleagues, staged between a kitchen sink and computer screens. Here, masked with the cartoonish and stereotyped filters offered by the software, the women confess and mock the precarity of the cultural worker. This exposure of the exhaustion could be read as a feminist performance in the sense of sharing.²⁶ Through the gathering of documented personal precarity caused by a neoliberal work demand, solidarity is exercised among workers across immaterial, creative, domestic, and reproductive labor.

cobratheater.cobra’s collectivism displays the affective level of individual precarity through several examples on *snap-chat*. At the same time, the repetition of individualised troubles proves a general structural condition of contemporary performance art production. However, although the “cobras” are sending their warmest thoughts and greetings to their colleague Gerlach, they physically leave her on her own: Online sociality in the mobile network. The network is apart, since the neoliberal work market demands flexibility and mobility: a one-month production here, another three weeks there, a residency abroad again. The geographical work mobility functions as a promise of economic upward mobility for the artists – or at least maintenance of a minimum income and the right to work. Physically present sociality is thereby threatened by economically forced migration.

²⁶ Here, I think of the practice of sharing as seen in 2017 in the #metoo movement, which points back to the tradition within feminist affect theory represented by, amongst others, Audre Lorde and Sara Ahmed. Both writers accumulate episodes of racist or sexist behaviour experienced by themselves in, for example, Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* (1984) and Ahmed’s recent *Living a Feminist Life* (2017).

DISOBEY ECONOMICALLY FORCED (IM)MOBILITY

While the colleagues - due to temporary project work or residencies away from home – are all placed in different corners of Germany, Gerlach is able to be present and represent cobratheater.cobra. Since 2016 she is officially unemployed on “Hartz IV”, the unpopular German unemployment benefit and social welfare package of 409 Euros a month. “Hartz IV” was introduced in 2010 and is an example of the German austerity policy with not only financial, but also social consequences. It includes directives on how to live and how (not) to move. Gerlach presents her personal ambivalence towards the imperative of mobility haunting the life of the performance artist: Officially Gerlach is allowed to travel only 21 days a year when receiving “Hartz IV”, in order to mainly be available for possible job offers in Dresden, where she is based. Gerlach decides to reject the geographical imprisonment and conduct what I would call an infrastructural performance of civil disobedience through her on-going practice *HARTZ IV UND DIE WELT GEHÖRT DIR* (“Hartz IV and the world belongs to you”, my translation). Gerlach has taken the “freedom” to travel as much as possible across Mid-Europe in 2016. Invited by Wenner and Eibeler to perform in Hamburg, Gerlach finds another possibility to break the Hartz IV-conduct of immobility: Gerlach travels 600 km from Dresden to Hamburg to perform. She travels by train as unemployed, performing her self-declared freedom, a civil disobedience. She travels through several of the cities where her cobra-colleagues are simultaneously working and being paid as performance artists. She travels and performs for the label cobratheater.cobra. Her individual civil disobedience against geographical imprisonment in Dresden is placed in the context of the other working cobras. As a collective, they expose how the “freedom” to move is structurally dictated by their working opportunities within an unpredictable work market of independent performance art where, at the lowest income-level, Gerlach is governed by the state and cannot move. Their collection of migratory inequality I categorise as – with the term of Berlant – a collection of neoliberal situation tragedies. In the discourse on the artist as worker, it is often criticized that the narrative becomes too generic and fetishizes certain simplistic motives such as poverty or loneliness.²⁷ However, with cobratheater.cobra, a rather explicit inequality within the independent performance art scene is on display. Here, I detect a conflict in neoliberalism: the structural inequality within the group of colleagues shows a conflict between the lived mobility of the freelancers and Gerlach’s immobility dictated by austerity policies. Be-

27 Maurizio Lazzarato warns against a generic “Artist’s Critique”, which he finds developed by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2007). Lazzarato is very specific on the inequalities of creative workers: “In ein und demselben Beruf arbeitend, kann man reich und abgesichert sein oder arm und einer Situation extremer Prekarität ausgesetzt. Zwischen den beiden Extremen gibt es eine beinahe unendliche Abstufung und Abwandlung bezüglich Situation und Status” (see “Die Missgeschicke der „Künstlerkritik“ und der kulturellen Beschäftigung “ Maurizio Lazzarato, 173–197 in Raunig and Wuggenig 2016, 379).

sides exposing the unequal economic and social conditions of performance art workers, *cobratheater.cobra* also proposes civil disobedience towards the state-led government of precarious subjects.

A PROMISING INFECTION

Obviously a network does not make its members more equal than the market, the curators, the grant juries, and the state allow: despite the label as a solidary infrastructural performance producing a plurality of aesthetics, shared visibility, individual legitimisation, and access to the performance art scene, *cobratheater.cobra* is neither a guarantee of continued work, nor a stabilisation of income through collective sharing of income across projects. In the performance, Gerlach tells how a member of the Austrian performance collective God's Entertainment addresses her as a *cobratheater.cobra* member, asking her what she presented in the last performance of *cobratheater.cobra* in the frame of the Really Useful Theater in Berlin. But Gerlach did not attend that *cobratheater.cobra* performance in Berlin. Other colleagues performed under the same label. She explains the model of *cobratheater.cobra* to the God's Entertainment member: "I'm a part of a network which has so many protagonists and so little structure that all financial supporters and institutions constantly say: set up an organisation. Set up a business entity. Set up a contact person."²⁸ Her utterance states the institutional advisory and interpellation of the artists to become recognisable as an organisation, identifiable as a financial model, and addressable in terms of a reduction of the label into one subject. Gerlach states how they are too many and too much, exploding the reasonable number of the performance art collective, at the same time having too little structure to be an entity to collaborate with. In other words, *cobratheater.cobra* does not respond to the institutional interpellation in the Althusserian sense: similarly to the police officer, the art institution shouts "Hey you", and a network-choir of internet-dispersed subjects answer with more than 40 ephemeral snap-chat videos. *cobratheater.cobra* does not fulfill institutional expectations, but the label does allow the individual to identify with the collective: Gerlach states her legitimisation in *cobratheater.cobra* saying, "I am part of [...]," which I would interpret as an affective belonging. Gerlach is not a soloist. She is infected: A part of the network *cobratheater.cobra*.

Artistic self-organisation and collectivism are phenomena which could easily be subscribed to a transitional, "immature" phase after finishing studies: a communal step into "the market" made by alumnae, who haven't yet found their own artistic signature, nor stabilised their individual life, nor working conditions. To me, as an academic gesture, there is a point in highlighting the artists' infrastructural performance as an aesthetic and political form of economic and social critique. I read, however, the current disproportionality

28 From the script *Caro von Cobra auf Kampnagel* (Gerlach 2016, 4), my translation.

in collectivism – groups too big exploding the artistic signature, exposing the inequality among the members – as a direct response to the increasing structural precarity and individualisation in our historical present; an individualisation, which is a characteristic of the project work and the possibilities for funding and career, and which already starts during art school, where – following the Bologna Process – each art student is trained to collect individual points and forms an individual, recognizable portfolio as artist genius.²⁹ A politics of belonging is negotiated in the structures and movement patterns of *cobratheater.cobra*: the right to belong in a social group and the right to appear without aligning with the neoliberal work ethos are exercised.

I conclude that infrastructural performance is a way of recomposing within the “given” political and economic conditions, insisting on the possibility of political change. When *cobratheater.cobra* criticises the idea of an artistic signature, the isolation and exhaustion of freelance workers, and the imperative of individual (im)mobility, they thereby also promote a collective political imagination: infection, disturbance, and disobedience are the means to start this change. The infrastructural performance is a critique and re-negotiation of what is promoted in neoliberalism as a given and unchangeable situational tragedy of each individual.

Concerns around the fragility of working subjects have increased against the backdrop of the so-called financial crises, cuts in education and culture, growing nationalism, and border politics. I would claim that infrastructural performance is a new phenomenon growing up with and out of these concerns, uttered by young performance artists who make artistic proposals within the practice of “social organisation”. In the visual arts, a tradition of self-organised art workers’ movements uttering institutional critique, fighting for a minimum wage, and visibility of women can be traced back to the first half of the 20th Century, but growing in the 70s and onwards.³⁰ Yet, as Airi Triisberg and Isabell Lorey have described, since the 00s a collective outspokenness on structural precarity has emerged.³¹ The organisation of and solidarity in social movements in and beyond art and education have been established such as W.A.G.E (2008–), Precarious Workers Brigade (2010–), the Occupy Movement (2011–). I define the category of infrastructural performance as neither a “social movement” nor an “art work”. It is both.

I would advocate for an understanding of the ongoing, collective infrastructural performance of *cobratheater.cobra* – on stages, on the internet, in funding applications and in ways of organising – as Avant-Garde in the sense of Peter Bürger: durational artistic activity which makes visible the very conditions and general categories of art, rather than serving “whole”, finished

29 See an elaborated reading of the conditions of art students following the Bologna Process in “The-One-Woman-Orchestra”, Schmidt 2016a.

30 See *Art Workers between Precarity and Resistance: A Genealogy* by Corina L. Apostol in Henriksson et al. 2015, 108.

31 Triisberg 2015; Lorey 2012.

art works of hermeneutic, aesthetic unity.³² Far more than making hermeneutic art works, cobratheater.cobra's artistic organisation must be read as an expanded, ongoing performance: an ongoing performance of constant criticality, which challenges the given structures within artistic production – and even, with this criticality, threatens its own very existence.³³

When reading the infrastructural performance of the network, it displays the technologies of subjectivation within artistic practice: how an artist subject becomes individualised, hypermobile or immobile and exhausted due to working conditions. It also proposes a range of performative technologies of assembly and promotes the possibility of change by reclaiming social relationality in times of structural precarity.

Continuing from Berlant's idea of the affective level of precarity uttered in situation tragedies, I propose that infrastructural performance is a reaction to the loss. It is not just an experience of an individual situation tragedy, but the reaction and answer to the situation tragedy: A disturbing and disobedient, collective reaction to structural precarity. This answer to structural precarity is a new affective state of collective optimism against the back-drop of individual situation tragedies: The activities of cobratheater.cobra propose the hope of political change through assembly. The infection is good: after fever comes strength.

32 Peter Bürger (1974) 1984, 19–20.

33 A few months after the performance of cobratheater.cobra, the documentation video on the website of *Really Useful Theatre* was taken away, censored by the members of cobratheater.cobra themselves. In the continuous critical practice of the network, they agreed to take the documentation away from public accessibility, "due to statements made during the performance that could be misconstrued as racist" (still-statement inserted in videodocumentation of the evening at Kampnagel, <http://usefultheater.de/really-useful-theater-auf-kampnagel/>, accessed 12.12.17). cobratheater.cobra's identity is defined by constant criticality in terms of peers reviewing before going public. Yet, the performance was censored after the show. Through correspondences by email with the curator Stefanie Wenner as well as Caroline Gerlach herself, I learned that the racist uttering was found in the way Gerlach describes a mask worn in one of the snap chat videos. Whether she or the software provides the racializing language is arguable. But the consequences of this utterance, which was anything but central in the dramaturgy or focus of the performance, caused the 10 cobra-collaborators to decide – after months of email and skype conferences – to invest the fee for the performance of 1300 Euro in a 3-day professionally moderated racism-sensitive conflict conversation for 9 of the 10 cobras (one did not participate in this so-called "white space"). Moving away from criticising precarity, the cobras ended up in a new precarity: spending unpaid hours evaluating an unpaid job. What came out of their engagement with critical whiteness (self)studies, will hopefully be discussed and published elsewhere. However, the critical practice of self-evaluation can be described as a central modus operandi in structural precarity: staying with the trouble in a double sense, criticising and optimising at one's own expense. In reality, the actual artwork is no longer accessible. The possible surplus value which it could attain through attention online, as well as the critique of structural precarity and knowledge sharing, which it actually exercised, are deleted. This article records the memorable work.

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